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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 023546

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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

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TAGS: PHUM KDEM SOCI CU

SUBJECT: LANDMARK FORUM BRINGS TOGETHER YOUNG CUBAN ACTIVISTS

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Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

¶11. (C) Summary: An unprecedented opposition youth forum brought together young Cuban pro-democracy activists and counterparts from Monterrey, Mexico on November 24 in Havana. The three-hour-long event, held at the PAO Residence, saw participants engage in open debate after watching an inspirational documentary on the fall of Milosevic. Many of the participants agreed on the need to coordinate the activities of the country's three biggest opposition youth groups. They acknowledged that they are much weaker than the Yugoslav youth groups (especially OTPUR) depicted in the documentary. Cuban authorities prevented at least 11 young activists from taking part, but did not interrupt the event or launch an immediate crackdown against participants. Retaliatory action could be harsh. End Summary.

¶12. (C) Sixty-three young pro-democracy activists from three of Cuba's most influential opposition youth groups gathered in Havana on November 24 for a landmark forum aimed at finding common ground. The event, held in the back yard of the PAO Residence, drew members XXXXXXXXXXXX. Also present were young members of other groups from Bayamo, Camaguey, Ciego de Avila, Havana, Pinar del Rio, Matanzas, Santa Clara, Santiago and Trinidad. Two young Mexican pro-democracy activists from Monterrey brought messages of support. Several USINT officials were also present. One would-be Cuban participant was detained and police prevented at least ten others from attending (mainly by confiscating their ID cards), but the GOC did not launch an immediate crackdown after the event.

"RESISTANCE"

¶13. (C) After brief welcoming remarks by Poloff, the three youth-group leaders addressed the crowd and then turned the microphone over to the Mexicans, who spoke passionately about "solidarity" and the inevitable triumph of democracy in Cuba. Participants then watched a stirring, 70-minute documentary on the fall of Yugoslavian dictator Milosevic, which emphasized the role of youth group OTPOR ("Resistance") in precipitating change, through rallies, outreach and biting sarcasm. Among the scenes that resonated most with participants were those in which the regime labeled OTPOR activists as "terrorists." (Note: Virtually all of the viewers have been branded "mercenaries," "terrorists" or "traitors." End Note.) On the other hand, it was clear to the Cubans that OTPOR had more room to maneuver in Yugoslavia and that Cuban groups are far behind in terms of influence

and organizational capacity.

ONGOING HARASSMENT

¶4. (C) For the ensuing 90 minutes, participants took turns addressing the group in an open debate. Topics included the intense, ongoing harassment of activists, particularly those in eastern Cuba; horrific prison conditions and attacks by guards; a project to press the GOC to allow the reopening of a Catholic university; and the problematic situation of HIV/AIDS sufferers, thousands of whom are unable to receive the medicines they require. A common theme at the forum was the need to coordinate the activities of the key youth groups, and to network with university groups in a way that avoids a State Security crackdown.

HEAVY STATE SECURITY PRESENCE

¶5. (C) The State Security presence around the venue, in Havana's Miramar district, was heavy, and police patrol cars passed by the site frequently. Two large vans of the Cuban telecom, ETECSA, were parked next door. However, the GOC made no obvious effort to interrupt the event, either through power cuts or blocked street access. (XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told us November 25 that they were not aware of any of their groups' participants being detained after the event.) There was only one incident involving a possible GOC provocateur. An uninvited "independent journalist" who showed up and gained entry after asking a youth-group leader to vouch for him addressed the group and rejected the messages of the Mexicans and the documentary, saying "the problems of Mexico and Yugoslavia are not the problems of Cuba."

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PRISONER QUILT DISPLAYED

¶6. (C) A centerpiece of the forum was the vertical display of the "prisoners of conscience" quilt, a paneled work honoring the 75 peaceful pro-democracy and human rights activists jailed in the "Black Spring" crackdown of 2003. (Sixty of the 75 remain behind bars.) The imprisoned activists' names are embroidered on the quilt, which was created in Boston by members of the group Cuban Flag. The quilt drew attention and generated considerable buzz.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) That 63 young "opositores" would travel long distances, at substantial personal expense and with no assurance that they would not be subsequently imprisoned, shows the hunger among some Cuban youth not only for change, but for action to set that change in motion. As thought-provoking as the documentary and debate were, the true success of the November 24 event lay in the networking that occurred on the sidelines, with small groups of like-minded young Cubans meeting each other, most for the first time. The event also went a long way toward building bridges between the XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, and XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, which have for years suffered from mutual mistrust and bad blood, some of it personality-driven. For one evening, at least, the leaders of these groups focused on their common objectives.

¶8. (C) One key value in the event was that it was a grass-roots, Cuban-generated activity. It would not have happened without USINT providing the venue and facilitating contacts. It is one small but important counterpoint to the regime's boast that since July 31, all Cubans have been quiet and accepting of Fidel's "proclama." We anticipate that the

Cuban Government will retaliate harshly, both against the young dissidents and against USINT, which helped sponsor the event at their request. The regime will likely use state media and mass-based communist organizations to label the youth leaders as USG agents, and mobilize militant thugs and State Security officials to punish them with "acts of repudiation," citations, brief detentions, and possibly expulsions from workplaces and universities. We will be working just as intently to encourage actions in the other direction, particularly more/better networking among university students who oppose the regime.

PARMLY